ROWAN WILLIAMS

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ABSTRACT

Rowan Williams' ecclesiology is shaped by his account of the spiritual life. He examines the transformation of human beings' relationships to one another driven by their encounter with God's utterly gracious love in Jesus Christ. The church is the community of forgiven people generated by Christ's resurrection. It is animated by its constant exposure to God's love in Christ in Word and Sacrament. It is held to that exposure by its doctrinal discipline. It is a community in which members go on learning from one another how to go more deeply into that exposure. For Williams, the church's commitment to unity and its commitment to truth go together: truth cannot be discovered without holding together in unity to learn from one another; and proper ecclesial unity is unity in this search for truth.

KEYWORDS

Rowan Williams, ecclesiology, church, resurrection, unity, truth

Rowan Williams (b. 1950) has moved from the university to the church and back again. Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at the University of Oxford from 1986 to 1992, he was then elected as Bishop of Monmouth, Archbishop of Wales, and eventually Archbishop of Canterbury (from 2002 to 2012), before returning to university life as Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge, in 2013. Yet although the academic and ecclesial worlds might be very different, the link between the work he has done in the two contexts is very strong, not least because of the centrality of ecclesiology to his theology.

Williams' theology is not easy to summarise. He is not one given to producing systematic overviews or bird's-eye guides. The vast majority of his writing is occasional – a response to particular invitations or (especially in his time as Archbishop) particular challenges or opportunities. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify a broad shape that unites a good deal of his work, and it is in the context of this broad shape that it is possible to speak of the centrality of ecclesiology.

I. THE PLACE OF ECCLESIOLOGY IN ROWAN WILLIAMS' WORK

Williams' work has its roots in an exploration of the Christian spiritual tradition. It grows in the soil of a broadly apophatic, even ascetic account of the spiritual life – of growth in Christian faith. Yet when, in the light of that tradition, he describes the transformation wrought in human beings by God's love in Christ, he consistently turns the spotlight on the on-going remaking of their relations to one another. The transformation wrought in human beings by God's grace is a transformation made visible in the material of their common life. Since Williams' theology is above all things an exploration of the difference made by God's love in Christ, at its centre is the description of this transformed sociality – and the nature of transformation is made visible in the life of the church. The central shape, then, of Williams' theology is a move from the territory of spirituality (an account of spiritual discipline and spiritual growth) to the territory of ecclesiology (an account of the ways in which Christians are called to learn from one another, and to learn to live together). We might tentatively say that the idea of *growing up together* is the key to Williams' theology as a whole.

In Williams' descriptions, what human beings are saved *from* is clear. Human beings live, he suggests, in a world where the goods that each person pursues cannot all be realised simultaneously, and where a people's desire for the good is distorted by their imagining and

experience of others' desires as standing over against theirs. This is an unnatural world where competition, rivalry, and defensiveness appear to be the natural shape of our relations.

What human beings are saved *by* is equally clear. The world is loved by its maker, God, who as the one who sustains the whole world is not a competitor or rival within it. God's love is a love beyond the calculations that shape the fallen world – indeed, it is a love that overthrows those calculations. It is a love that, properly speaking, cannot be coerced, hoarded, or manipulated.

A good deal of Williams' theology describes the transformation that such love works when it impinges upon human lives – when they are opened up to the possibility that their ultimate security is granted by God's love, not by their defensive self-positioning amidst a world of rivals. And a good deal of Williams' description focuses on the challenge that such a realisation creates for habits and imaginations shaped by and for the world of rivalry. For those whose habits of speech are fitted for that world, to encounter the gospel is 'to be questioned, judged, stripped naked and left speechless' (1979: 1 [all references in the main text are to works by Williams]). Allowing this love to reshape one is 'a hard and frightening task' (2002b: 33) that will involve 'pain and disorientation' because it asks one to forget that one has 'a self to be shielded, reinforced, consoled and lied to' (1982: 54). It calls one to let that old self die. As such, '[t]he Gospel frees us from fear and fantasy … it is the great enemy of self-indulgent fantasy' (1983a: 17).

Human beings are set free by this love to see and to accept their finitude and their materiality not as limitations on their power, but as their gift: as the existence given to them by God, as the material on which God is working, and as a medium through which God can speak to the world. They are set free to become people whose lives, by being lived differently, can speak to the world precisely of God's love beyond calculation. If they are 'stripped naked and left speechless', it is in order to become God's speech.

Yet to be made into God's speech is to be made into God's speech *to one another*. It involves people becoming words spoken to one other, and becoming hearers of the word that is spoken to them by one other. The transformation that God's love works when it impinges upon human lives takes the form of a reconstruction of human beings' relations to one another and to their world.

For Williams, the Church is the crucible of that transformation. It is not by any means the only place where God's love is reshaping relationships, but it is the place where the source of that transformation in God is named, acknowledged and pursued – however fallibly and incompletely – and where the nature of God's work precisely as a transformation of sociality is displayed. Ecclesiology is therefore absolutely central to Williams theology because it treats how people should form a life together in response to the Gospel. It is grounded in the conviction that the Gospel 'makes possible new levels of belonging together in the human world' (2002a).

II. THE CHURCH AS THE COMMUNITY OF JESUS

At the centre of the life of the church stands Jesus of Nazareth. In his enthronement sermon as Archbishop of Canterbury in 2002, Williams told the following story:

> About twelve years ago, I was visiting an Orthodox monastery, and was taken to see one of the smaller and older chapels. It was a place intensely full of the memory and reality of prayer. The monk showing me around pulled the curtain from in front of the sanctuary, and inside was a plain altar and one simple picture of Jesus, darkened and rather undistinguished. But for some reason at that moment it was as if the veil of the temple was torn in two: I saw as I had never seen the simple fact of Jesus at the heart of all our words and worship, behind the curtain of our anxieties and our theories, our struggles and our suspicion. Simply there; nothing anyone can do about it, there he is

> as he has promised to be till the world's end. Nothing of value happens in the Church that does not start from seeing him simply there in our midst, suffering and transforming our human disaster. (2003a)

The basic shape of Williams' theology, as described above, is visible in this anecdote. What human beings are saved from – the 'human disaster' – is a world of 'anxieties … struggles and … suspicion'. What rescues humanity from that disaster is not any human achievement or strategy but something '[s]imply there', unavoidably and faithfully – one who does not act as a player in the world of anxiety and suspicion, but stands at the heart of it (or even 'behind' it). And that transformation is seen in whatever 'of value happens in the Church', in the Church's 'words and worship'. And the one who stands at the heart is the man Jesus of Nazareth.

Williams consistently declares that Jesus is the incarnation of God – the making fully present in the world of the utterly gratuitous love of God. (And this is true in both senses of the phrase 'love of God': Jesus is one who, in the power of the Spirit, lives in unfettered love for the Father, and one who, in the same power, enacts the Father's love of the world.) Though as utterly particular as the enthronement sermon's 'one simple picture of Jesus, darkened and rather undistinguished' suggests, this human life is of unlimited significance. 'Jesus is the form which God's judgment takes' (1993: 257); he is the form which God's creative action – and the form which God's people-shaping power takes. 'I can't see any way of being a Christian', Williams says, 'that doesn't involve you at some point saying that it is in relation to Christ that human beings become as human as they are meant to be' (2000c).

Jesus is

> free from local limitation, and free from the limitation of belonging to the past: without ceasing to be a particular person in a particular place, he is capable of interpreting an unlimited range of human situations … and there is no place or time or

> condition in which he can be domesticated, in which we can say that his story and his Spirit are exhaustively defined. He is utterly unsusceptible to definition; and while we may continue to burden him with our hopes, fantasies and projections, there is an obstinate and restless dimension of unclarity which will break through and challenge sooner or later. (1982b: 82)

The 'restless dimension of unclarity' is precisely all that is not yet taken into account whenever Christians (as they must) describe and define Jesus – the excess or surplus that is ready to disrupt the Church's existing patterns of thought and action. Williams does not picture this surplus as a passive hinterland, awaiting further exploration, but as an active presence, capable of breaking in as creative judgment.

If the Church is, as described above, 'the place where the source of [the world's] transformation in God is named, acknowledged and pursued', then it is the place where the particular human being Jesus of Nazareth is named, his unlimited significance explored, and his active and dangerous exceeding of the Church's present understanding is acknowledged and awaited.

More specifically, the Church is, for Williams, the Church of the Resurrection. The undefended life of God was transformatively present in the world of rivalry and suspicion in Jesus of Nazareth, but was pushed out of that world on the cross. As Jesus died, his disciples abandoned him to save their own skins, throwing in their lot with the world of defensiveness and self-protection. Yet not even direct and deliberate denial of their Lord was enough to move the disciples beyond his promised, insistent presence. Jesus returned to them and forgave them, transforming their betrayal.

Williams describes, for instance, the encounter between Peter and the risen Jesus on the shore of Galilee, describing how Jesus' questioning drives Peter to face his betrayal, and transforms the betrayer into one who will feed the people. 'Peter's fellowship with the Lord is

not over, not ruined, it still exists and is alive because Jesus invites him to explore it further … To know that Jesus still invites is to know that he accepts, forgives, bears and absorbs the hurt done: to hear the invitation is to know oneself forgiven, and *vice versa'* (1982b: 30). The resurrection, says Williams, creates forgiven persons, in a community of the forgiven (1982b: xii). The resurrection creates the Church.

III. THE CHURCH AS THE COMMUNITY OF WORD AND SACRAMENT

The Church, in order to be the Church, must constantly represent to itself the fact that its life depends upon Jesus' life. It is not accidentally but essentially *his* community, and its life demands 'steady and radical exposure to the fundamental events of Christian faith' (1987b: 7). The Church acknowledges this demand in part through its involvement in sacramental action. '[A] Christian community', Williams says, 'involved in activities it calls "sacramental" is a community *describing* itself in a way that is importantly at odds with other sorts of description' (2000b: 209, Williams' italics). In the Eucharist, for instance, the Church 'shows itself its source and its criterion' (1982a: 97); it is an activity in which the Church is shown again and again that it is dependent upon the prior action of Jesus of Nazareth.

When Christians celebrate the Eucharist, they relinquish the bread and wine as their own possessions, and receive them back from Jesus' hands (1982b: 102–3) and so are marked out as the Church. '[T]he great mark of discipleship to the risen Christ is, as the New Testament has it, that we eat and drink with him after his resurrection' (1995: ix).

> The glorified Christ, crucified and risen, is eternally active towards God the Father on our behalf, drawing us into the eternal movement of self-giving love that the Son or Word directs towards the source of all, the God Jesus calls 'Abba'. The sacrifice of

> the cross is, among other things, the 'transcription' into this world's terms of the Son's movement of love towards the Father in heaven. In the Eucharist, our prayer is swept into that current, and we are set free to share in the Son's self-giving. The giving of thanks over the elements renews for us the covenant made by God in Christ, and the work of God in the cross is again 'applied' to us, in word and action, in body and soul. (1995: viii)

The Eucharist is, in a sense then, the presence of Christ in the Church – but

> the presence that is appropriate and intelligible in the Eucharist is neither the presence of an idea in our minds … nor the presence of a uniquely sacred *object* on the Table. It is the presence of an active Christ, moving in love not only towards the Father but towards us. (1995: viii–ix, Williams' italics)

In celebrating the Eucharist, the Church acknowledges its existence as a community held together despite failures and betrayals by the gracious giving of God's love in Christ; it acknowledges that it is a community given the terrifying privilege of handling this gift, and passing it on, made by this gift into givers and communicators.

A Church seeking 'steady and radical exposure to the fundamental events of Christian faith' will also 'necessarily accord central and decisive importance to Scripture, since Scripture is the unique witness to those events' (1987b: 7). The Bible, says Williams,

> tells us what we could not otherwise know: it tells us that God, the maker of the world, is committed to that world and desires with all his being to save it from disaster and the imprisonment of sin; that he does this by calling a people to witness to him by their prayers and their actions, in obedience to what he shows them of his will through the Law; that he brings this work to completion when God the eternal Son, the eternal Word, becomes human as Jesus of Nazareth and offers his life to

> destroy or to 'soak up', as you might say, the terrible consequences of our sin; and that Jesus is raised from the tomb to call a new people together in the power of the Spirit, who will show what kind of God God is in the quality of their life together and their relation with him … This is the world of the Bible into which the Church has to be brought again and again. (2002c)

The Bible is the engine of the Church's exposure to the Gospel. It is 'the utterances and records of human beings who have been employed by God to witness to his action in the world, now given to us by God so that we may learn who he is and what he does; and the "giving" by God is by means of the resurrection of Jesus' (2003a: 33). It is a witness to God's formation of a resurrection people in the midst of the world, and it is by the witness of the Scriptures that the resurrection people is formed and sustained in the present.

The Church cannot rely, however, on some existing systematic or harmonized readings of Scripture. Scripture is a bearer of the 'restless dimension of unclarity', the excess or surplus described above, and the Church is therefore called to ongoing reading, to an extravagant patience with the text. The Church is to be formed by prayerful and reflective reading practised intensely and devoutly over years, in a constant return to the text, in the knowledge that it will always say more than the Church currently expects.

Above all, the Church is formed by reading in company (2001a: ix), with each individual reading with those who read differently, and those whose readings challenge that individual to look again, look more closely, and to take more time. The Church is therefore properly and inherently a community of conversation – even argument – about Scripture.

IV. THE CHURCH AS A DOCTRINAL COMMUNITY

For Williams, doctrine too needs to be understood in relation to the Church's dependence upon 'steady and radical exposure' to it source. The role of doctrine, he says, 'is to *hold us*

still before Jesus' (2000a: 37, Williams' italics); its purpose is to hold open 'the possibility of preaching Jesus as a questioning and converting presence in ever more diverse cultures and periods' (1989: 17). More fully:

> The slow and difficult evolution of a doctrinal language, creeds and definitions … [has] to do at heart with maintaining the possibility of speaking about a God who becomes unreservedly accessible in the person of Jesus Christ and in the life of Christ's community. What is rejected is, pretty consistently, any teaching that leaves God only provisionally or partially involved in the communicating of the new life of grace and communion. (1991: 32)

This is why it is no accident that Trinity and Christology were at the heart of the formation of classical doctrine. The 'slow and difficult evolution' of Trinitarian and Christological doctrine has to do precisely with securing at the heart of the Church's life an irremovable, unsurpassable attention to Jesus of Nazareth as the one in whom God has become unreservedly accessible – and through whom God's saving and transformative judgment is heard. In the light of the discussion above, it should be no surprise to hear Williams say that 'all doctrine [is], essentially, reflection on Easter' (1982b: xiii).

> Doctrine is about our end (and our beginning); about what in our humanity is not negotiable, dispensable, vulnerable to revision according to political convenience or cultural choice and fashion … Doctrine purports to tell us what we are for, and what the shape is of a life lived in accordance with the way things are, and how such a life becomes accessible to us, even in the middle of the corruption and unfreedom of a shadowed history. (1997: 382).

Doctrine emerges, as Williams sees it, within the worshipping life of the Church – the life gathered by Word and Sacrament around Jesus. That worshipping life is characterised by an open, diverse, evolving, even playful richness of verbal and non-verbal speech. The diversity

and evolution of that speech, however, unavoidably raises questions about coherence and faithfulness – about what apparently natural developments undermine the existing breadth of that speech and what differences make a shared conversation in this speech impossible. 'Only in the activity of conversation do we find what the depths and what the limits are of our common language, what it is that holds us together as sharers in one world' (1990: 283). Doctrinal reflection investigates the extent to which '[t]he openness, the "impropriety", the *play* of liturgical imagery is anchored to a specific set of commitments as to the limits and defining conditions within which the believing life is lived' and it attempts to find ways to 'characterize these defining conditions' (1987a: 236).

> Given a commitment to the truthfulness of the whole complex of practices, verbal and non-verbal, moral, imaginative, devotional, and reflective, which embody 'the church's conviction' about Jesus, dogmatic Christological definition sets out to establish the conditions for telling this truth in the most comprehensive, least conceptually extravagant and least idly mythological language. (1993: 250–1)

Heresy, by contrast, is found wherever adoption of a particular pattern of speech brings with it a 'major reduction in the range of available resources of meaning' (1983b: 16). Williams therefore puts 'heresy' in the same category as 'the deadness of bureaucratic jargon, the deadness of uplifting waffle, the deadness of acronyms and target setting'. Heresy is one of the forms of language that 'flattens out the depth' of human life, and deprives the Church of a resource for bringing before the resurrected one 'the extremities of experience, obsessive passion or jealousy, adoration, despair' (2002d: 173–4).

If, for Williams, doctrine emerges within the worshipping life of the Church, it does so most urgently insofar as the church is a more-than-local community. It is in the exchange between Christians in different contexts (geographically and, in a sense, temporally) that the

limits of difference and evolution in the Church's speech are most deeply tested, and that the defining conditions of that language are most likely to be discerned.

The very idea of 'orthodoxy' in the early Church emerged, according to Williams, from the attempt of scattered Christian communities to recognize in one another a focus on the same Christ that they themselves worshipped. As Williams tells the story, through the second and third centuries a distinction arose between strands of Christianity for which communication between congregations was an *ad hoc* and occasional affair, and strands in which there were 'regular and significant links' to the point of 'an almost obsessional mutual interest and interchange' between congregations – interest and interchange that took the form of visits, meetings, and letters (1989: 11–12). These obsessively interconnected Christians believed that they were exploring a common heritage, that they were hearers of a common gospel – and that it therefore *mattered* that they could not yet see the unity between their differing languages. Doctrine emerged as a way of thinking the unity of a scattered Church.

The irony of doctrine is, however, that the very passion to hold the Church's language open against threatened closures can itself become a threat. Williams notes that the history of doctrine 'has the paradoxical character of a repeated effort of definition designed to counter the ill effects of definition itself – rather like the way in which a good poet will struggle to find a fixed form of words that will decisively avoid narrowing and lifeless fixtures or closures of meaning' (1990: 285).

When 'we begin instead to use this language to defend ourselves, to denigrate others, to control and correct … then it becomes a problem' (2000a: 37).

> [T]he Church's dogmatic activity, its attempts to structure its public and common language in such a way that the possibilities of judgement and renewal are not buried, must constantly be chastened by the awareness that it so acts in order to give place to the freedom of God – the freedom of God from the Church's sense of itself and its

> power, and thus the freedom of God to renew and absolve. This is why dogmatic language becomes empty and even destructive of faith when it is isolated from a lively and converting worship and a spirituality that is not afraid of silence and powerlessness. (2000: 84)

V. THE CHURCH AS A COMMUNITY OF TRUTH AND UNITY

The transformation that forms the church, according to Williams, is not over in a flash. It takes time, and is worked out by repeated encounter with Jesus of Nazareth, in Word and Sacrament, steadied by doctrine. It requires, again, 'steady and radical exposure' to Christ. It is not that there is anything incomplete or unfinished in God, or in God's love for the world in the incarnation – but that God's love, decisively enacted for the world in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, is inexhaustible and always more than Christ's followers have yet grasped. So Williams can say that 'Jesus grants us a solid identity, yet refuses us the power to "seal" or finalize it, and obliges us to realize that this identity only exists in an endless responsiveness to new encounters with him in the world of unredeemed relationships' (1982b: 76).

That 'endless responsiveness' takes the form, in part, of a deep commitment on the part of members of the Church to learn *from one another* – to grow up together. I spoke at the beginning of this chapter about the transformation wrought by the gospel as one in which people are made into God's speech to one another. I said that the transformation involves people becoming words spoken to one other, and becoming hearers of the word that is spoken to them by each other. To be drawn into the life of Christ is therefore, for Williams, to become those who communicate that life to one another. 'To belong in the apostolic community', Williams says, 'is to be involved in a complex act of giving away: to be at the disposal of God's will, to give away the life we have, so that God's life can be given through

us' (1994: 257). And precisely because the journey of discipleship for each person is one that involves the whole messy and particular material of their unique life history being brought to the feet of the resurrected Jesus, the word that each person's life becomes will speak about Jesus differently.

I also wrote earlier of the 'restless dimension of unclarity' that characterises encounters with Jesus: the excess or surplus that is not a passive hinterland awaiting further exploration, but an active presence, capable of breaking in as creative judgment. The difference between two members of the Body of Christ is, for Williams, one of the characteristic places where that presence lives. That is what it means for God's life to be given through the members of the Body. Each member of the body is therefore called to be open 'to the wealth of communal life and thought' (1975: 33). No one individual, no one group of Christians already *possesses* Christ, and so does not need to receive him – and to go on receiving him – from others.

The Church is therefore an ongoing conversation. That is true for Williams at the level of the local body of Christ. It is also true at the trans-local level – in the life of the Church of England, for instance, and in the life of the wider Anglican Communion. And it is true in ecumenism, and in that strange conversation in time that unites different generations of the Church into one tradition. The Church simply *is* the conversation of the faithful at all these levels.

However, to describe the Church in this way risks papering over some very wide cracks. Many of the differences that cross the church involve disagreements about what it means to be oriented towards encounter with Jesus – disagreements in which others in the Church are thought to be misleading guides to the Scriptures (or to have turned their back on those Scriptures), or in which they are thought to have strayed (or galloped) beyond the doctrinal discipline that is supposed to hold the Church together *as* a conversation. One of the central

contributions of Williams' ecclesiology has been his wrestling with precisely this question – and that wrestling was itself forced deeper by his immersion in the Anglican Communions controversies, especially as regards human sexuality, during his time as Archbishop of Canterbury.

Williams himself clearly has (as we have seen) a particular construal of what faithfulness to the gospel of Jesus of Nazareth involves. Just as clearly, others in the Church can and do differ from him, not just in detail, but in their ways of describing what faithfulness to the gospel means. There is therefore a difference between asking whether he is trying to be faithful to the gospel in the terms in which he understands that faithfulness, and asking whether he is trying to be so in his interlocutor's terms. Yet if an interlocutor contented herself with asking whether Williams' understanding of the gospel, and of the nature of obedience to that gospel, agreed with hers, she would be insulating myself against any deep challenge or insight that his understanding may have to offer to her: she would be declaring in advance that she was right, that those who differ with her are wrong, and that she is not open to reconsidering that opinion. She would be failing to take seriously a situation in which a church is divided precisely by the diversity of its construals of 'obedience', and so each construal is rendered controversial. Clearly something more subtle is needed.

There is more than one way of striving for that greater subtlety, however. The most obvious is to make some attempt to set out the absolutely central points on which one is not willing to compromise, and to ask about someone else's agreement only with those central points – combining that adamant stance with a flexible willingness to learn on all other matters. And some such attempt to set out what is central is an inevitable part of the mix – though it has perhaps not played quite as central a role in Anglicanism as it has in other traditions where habitual reference to a detailed 'Confession' of some kind has been an important driver of theological conversation.

Williams suggests, however, that Christians should also be asking whether the claims of those who differ from them are nevertheless recognisably a contribution *to a common conversation* about obedience. That is: rather than asking a static question ('Does your position agree with mine, or does it agree with the points I have identified as central to mine?') Williams is suggesting that Christians ask a dynamic question: 'Having heard what you say, can I recognise the possibility of being called to deeper obedience to the gospel (given what I currently understand that obedience to mean) by what you say, and can I see the possibility (given what you currently understand that obedience to mean) of calling you to deeper obedience?'.

'If I might put it in a formula that may sound too much like jargon,' he says,

> I suggest that what we are looking for in each other is the grammar of obedience: we watch to see if our partners take the same kind of time, sense that they are under the same sort of judgement or scrutiny, approach the issue with the same attempt to be dispossessed by the truth they are engaging with. This will not guarantee agreement; but it might explain why we should always first be hesitant and attentive to each other. Why might anyone think this might count as a gift of Christ to the Church? (2001b: 11)

Can I, Williams asks, look at that other Christian and recognise that he or she came to that disturbing conclusion on the basis of a serious and recognisable attempt to be obedient to the gospel? Can I see that he or she is recognisably reading the same Scriptures, praying with the same seriousness, worshipping the same God? Can I see that his or her discernment is being offered as a gift to the Church, an attempt to show the church more of the Church's Lord and the demands that his love makes on our lives?

With a question like this in mind, a Christian might move from a picture of the world divided into those with whom he agrees versus those with whom he disagrees (whether

wholesale, or on the fundamentals), to a more complex picture in which, around the brittle inner circle, there is the more unruly company of those with whom he disagrees but with whom he shares enough to sustain a serious conversation: the wider circle of a community not in possession of truthfulness but in serious pursuit of it, hoping and working for it.

Williams often uses the language of 'recognition' for this wider circle. The boundary of this wider circle of recognition is, however, inevitably much more difficult to discern than are the boundaries of truthfulness – though boundaries there certainly are. And those boundaries are not defined simply by the *forms* of obedience – by the bare fact that my opponent appeals to the same Scriptures, say, or tells a broadly recognisable salvation-historical story. Williams asks Christians whether they can 'see in one another at least some of the same habits of attention and devotion to Scripture, whatever the diversity of interpretation', but beyond that he asks whether they 'can see that the other person is trying to *listen* to God's self-communication in scripture, not just imposing an agenda' (2009a).

We can see how this emphasis coheres with Williams' wider ecclesiology by walking through a portion of an address he gave to the 2008 Lambeth Conference, in which he asked directly what 'Christian unity' might mean. '[F]irst and above all, this is union with Jesus Christ; accepting his gift of grace and forgiveness, learning from him how to speak to his Father, standing where he stands by the power of the Spirit. We are one with one another because we are called into union with the one Christ and stand *in* his unique place – stand in the Way, the Truth and the Life' (2008a). Here Williams offers a characteristic Trinitarian description of where the Church stands: as recipients of forgiveness at Jesus' hands, as brought by that forgiveness into relation to the one who does not stand over us as competitor or rival, and as drawn into union with him – into lives that say what his life says – by the power of the Spirit working on each member. 'Our unity is not mutual forbearance but being summoned and drawn into the same place before the Father's throne. *That* unity is a pure gift

– and something we can think of in fear and trembling as well as wordless gratitude; because to be in that place is to be in the light of absolute Truth, naked and defenceless.' This unity is not something achieved; nor is it something given at the end of the journey. Rather, just as Jesus is 'simply there', Christians are simply given each other. And note the deep connection in Williams' words between standing with each other and standing before God's transforming, freeing judgment. 'St John's gospel has been reminding us that the place of Jesus is not a place where ordinary, fallen human instinct wants to go. Yet it's where we belong, and where God the Father and Our Lord Jesus Christ want us to be, for our life, our joy and our healing.' In other words, despite all the language of strain, of difficulty, of being stripped and left speechless, this transformation is a homecoming. God's creatures belong with each other in this deep sense, and the journey deeper into God's love in Jesus Christ is a journey home. Human beings belong with God – and they belong with each other.

> That's the unity which is inseparable from truth. It's broken not when we simply disagree but when we stop being able to see in each other the same kind of conviction of being called by an authoritative voice into a place where none of us has an automatic right to stand. Christians divided in the sixteenth century, in 1930's Germany and 1980's South Africa because they concluded, painfully as well as (often) angrily, that something had been substituted for the grace of Christ – moral and ritual achievement, or racial and social pride, as if there were after all a way of securing our place before God by something other than Jesus Christ.

So there *are* limits to this unity – and they are not limits of the Church's ability to paper over cracks, and to keep the show on the road or the ship afloat by any means available – but they are the limits of recognition of an orientation to God's gracious love in Christ.

> Now all this might help us to see why Christian communities express their unity in so many visible, tangible ways. They read the same Bible in public and private, and

> shape their words and actions in conformity with it – or at least they try to. They seek for consistent practices around the sacraments, so that the baptism or eucharist of each community can be recognised by others as directed in the same way, working under the same authority. It happens in different ways and different degrees in different Christian confessions and families of churches; but all Christian communities have some such practice.

Churches are communities of Word and Sacrament – and, we might add, doctrinal communities – precisely because those things are the concrete forms of their obedience, the tangible forms of their mutual recognisability.

It is important to stress, therefore, that this unity is not, in Williams' eyes, a matter of 'unity for unity's sake' or of 'unity at all costs'. The whole process of seeking to sustain unity is directed to the deepening of truthfulness: the deepening of obedience to the God of Jesus Christ, the deepening of exposure to and proclamation of the gospel. On the other hand, to become truthful means precisely learning 'to act in such a way that my action becomes something given into the life of the community and in such a way that what results is glory – the radiating, the visibility, of God's beauty in the world', and it means 'looking and listening for Christ in the acts of another Christian who is manifestly engaged, self-critically engaged, with the data of common belief and worship' (2001b: 7, 13). Unity and truth are inseparable.

Williams expressed similar ideas in a 2005 address to General Synod, during a debate on the Windsor Report.

> I've become very much accustomed to being accused by both sides in this debate of setting unity before truth. And my dilemma, a dilemma which I suspect is shared by a good many people here, is that I'm not sure as a Christian that I'm wholly able to separate truth from unity. For as a Christian I believe that unity is what enables us to discover truth within the body of Christ, not simply truth according to my own

> preferences, my own intelligence, my own resources, but in the richness of life an understanding that is shared in the body. And part of the agony of the situation we face at the moment has to do with those two things beginning to pull apart from one another. (2005)

To be the Church is, for Williams, to be held together before Christ, learning from one another. It is to participate in an ongoing journey of learning together – and as the members of the Church can never have done with that learning of God's inexhaustible life, so they can never have done with one another. The gift of truth and the gift of each other are inseparable.

It is only when the recognition that enables this exchange breaks down, Williams suggests, that Christians should find themselves called to the tragic recognition that they and their opponents do not share a recognisable conversation, that those on opposing sides of whatever divide it is cannot call one another to obedience except by standing against one another, in prophetic denunciation of one kind or another.

Let me illustrate this. For Williams, appeals to Scripture in theological argument are properly *mediated* appeals. That is to say, the material gleaned from Scripture is subjected to the kind of attention and reflection where the emphasis falls on the attempt to understand the deep patterns of reasoning that move the Scriptures as a whole, and then to read particular injunctions in the light of those deep patterns, even when that means being taken beyond the plain sense. Imagine (for the sake of argument) that Williams were speaking to a Christian community that regarded 'obedience to the gospel' as quite straightforwardly defined by *un*mediated appeal to the plain sense of the Scriptures. Such a community might find that, except to the minor degree that they found the plain sense of certain Scriptures elucidated by his readings, Williams' arguments were simply *irrelevant* to its own way of doing theology – or, worse, that his arguments seemed like nothing more than sophisticated attempts to sidestep the Scriptures. They would not be able to see his arguments as, in any direct way,

calling them to deeper obedience (as they currently understand obedience). And they might find in return that they simply could not call him to deeper obedience, because the means by which they might do so – pointing out once again the plain sense of the Scriptures in question – was consistently met with a 'Yes, but ...'. In such a situation, we might have to conclude that there is not a common conversation about obedience. The attempt at conversation would stutter to a halt.

Where it does not fail, however, Christians will retain at least the possibility of being called out of themselves, and called more deeply into the truth, at each others' hands. At General Synod in 2009, in response to someone's comment about the proposed Anglican Covenant involving a giving up of rights, Williams said:

> I don't believe that a process of shared discernment is a handing over of something that belongs to me to someone to whom it doesn't belong, because I have a rather more, excuse the word, robust doctrine of our participation in the body of Christ than that. I don't believe that when I invite someone else to share my own process of prayer and decision making I'm resigning something which I ought to be clinging on to. I believe rather than I'm trying to discover more fully who I am in Christ by inviting others who share my life in Christ into the process of making a decision. (2009d)

In other words, Williams is describing the Church as a community in which not only do *I* seek *your* deeper obedience, but in which *I* also seek *your* seeking of *my* deeper obedience. I see that I can call you to deeper obedience, and I long for that, but I also see that you can call me to deeper obedience, and I long for that too. We are, in other words, talking about a community capable of sustaining an interlocking economy of desire: I desire Christ; you desire Christ; I desire your desiring of Christ; you desire my desiring of Christ; I desire your desiring of my desiring of Christ; you desire my desiring of your desiring of Christ ... and so

on. This is a process in which each is 'handed over' to the other, in which each learns to become more human, and to become more holy, through the other.

Williams holds that to be a community not in possession of truthfulness but in serious pursuit of it, hoping and working for it, requires just such commitment: it requires the safety that comes from being able to trust that you will not walk away from this conversation simply because we do not yet agree. Of course, it is not that divorce is impossible – but to walk into this marriage with a prenuptial agreement that assumes the inevitability or propriety of divorce is already to betray the commitment involved. This is a union in which the partners will have made what Williams has called 'a promise to be willing to be converted by each other' (2008b).

It is here, above all, that we can see what Williams took to be his role as Archbishop of Canterbury, and it is here above all that the attempts to create some kind of Anglican Covenant that characterised his time in Canterbury are best situated. In an interview in *Time* in 2007, Williams said, 'The task I've got is to try and maintain as long as possible the space in which people can have constructive disagreements, learn from each other, and try and hold that within an agreed framework of discipline and practice' (2007). Elsewhere he described his task, and that of other Anglicans concerned about the future of their disagreement, as 'thinking about how the most life-giving kinds of exchange are made possible' (2009b). His task, as he saw it, was to hold on to unity for the sake of truth.

Williams does not, however, believe that this is simply a recipe for inertia – for the kind of structural conservatism that arises when a large community can only travel at the speed of its slowest members.

> [T]o say that truth for a Christian is not discovered without unity is not to provide a simple solution to our dilemma. We all know … that there are some moments when the church, or parts of the church, take risks. They speak for a church that which

> doesn't yet exist, so they believe, out of a conscience informed by scripture and revelation. At the Reformation, our church and many others took that kind of risk. and [sic] we have to be candid, in our decision to ordain women to the priesthood we engage in something of that sort of risk. The trouble is, that risk really is risk. You don't and you can't know yet whether it's justified. The church is capable of error and any local church is capable of error, as the Thirty-Nine Articles remind us forcibly. So if one portion of the church decides that it must take a conscientious risk, then there are inevitable results to that. There are consequences in hurt, misunderstanding, rupture and damage. It does us no good to pretend that the cost is not real. So I don't think it will quite do to say, if anyone does really say this, that a risky act ought to have or can have no consequences.

There is an attempt at a delicate balance here: an affirmation both of the possibility of risk and the reality of consequences. If the Church is to be a community of gift and reception, of speech and hearing, it will often take the form of a community of prophecy and discernment – and needs both sides to remain in truth and unity.

Williams also does not believe that this attempt to hold on to unity is without serious cost. The question of the truthfulness of the Church is, from Williams' point of view, the question of whether the Church's members are becoming words that speak truly to each other, and speak truly to the world, of God's gracious love. The divisions amongst Christians that strike most deeply are precisely those in which each side believes that the other is heading down a path that will make such truthful speech impossible.

In a 2009 speech, Williams described the conflicts of the Anglican Communion in these terms. He spoke of those on one side who would say that 'Christian credibility is shattered by the sense of rejection and scapegoating which they experience … The cost they feel is often they cannot commend the Christianity that they long to believe in because they feel that they

are bound up in a system and a community where scapegoating and rejection are very deeply engrained' (2009b).

For these people, the danger is that the Church will cease speaking of God's love in Jesus Christ, and instead speak the language of the world of rivalry and suspicion – precisely that world from which human beings are saved. On the other hand, Williams said, there are

> those for whom the credibility of Christianity is at stake in another way, those for whom the cost is felt like this: that the decisions that others have made in other parts of the world have put them in a position where they cannot commend the Christianity they long to share with their neighbours with any ease or confidence because they feel that fellow Christians have somehow undermined their witness.

Here, the danger identified is of a failure to acknowledge that the Church is a single conversation, and that what is said in one place is communicated to the whole – such that decisions taken in isolation cannot but be damaging. In the light of these two deep concerns, Williams poses the question:

> How can those who share that sense of cost and that sense of profound anxiety about how to make the Gospel credible – how are they to come together at least for some recognition and respect to emerge? How are they to come together so that they can recognise the cost that the other bears, and also recognise the deep seriousness about Jesus and his Gospel that they share?

That is the characteristic question of Williams' ecclesiology.

V. AN UNFINISHED COMMUNITY

In closing, it is worth emphasising that there is no sense in Williams' work that the true unity of the Church is already in the Church's possession. The witness of the Church in the world is not simply found in the extent to which it has arrived at this unity already and displays it. Rather, its witness is, at least in part, given by the seriousness by which it acknowledges its

failure to display this unity, and the urgency with which it pursues it. This is a theme that, in different forms, has cropped up throughout Williams' writing on the Church. At the 2006 General Convention of The Episcopal Church, Williams told delegates: 'Life is proclaimed not in our achievement, our splendid record of witness to God, but in our admission of helplessness and of the continuing presence and lure of death in our lives. To be able to speak this, and not to retreat in fear or throw up defences is part of true life' (2009c). Much earlier, while still pursuing an academic career (and a few years before being appointed Lady Margaret Professor), he had written:

> If we had to choose between a Church tolerably confident of what it has to say and seeking only for effective means of saying it, and a Church constantly engaged in an internal dialogue and critique of itself, an exploration to discover what is central to its being, I should say that it is the latter which is more authentic – a Church which understands that part of what it is *offering* to humanity is the possibility of living in such a mode. (1984: 12, Williams' italics)

Between these two, around the time that he was appointed as Archbishop of Wales, he wrote:

> I long for the Church to be more truly itself ... Yet I must also learn to live in and attend to the reality of the Church as it is, to do the prosaic things that can and must be done now and to work at my relations now with the people who will not listen to me or those like me – because what God asks of me is not to live in the ideal future but to live with honesty and attentiveness in the present. (2000a: 85–6)

Finally, at the end of his tenure as Archbishop of Canterbury, Williams wrote an Advent letter to the Primates of the Anglican Communion.

> When we try to pretend that the holiness of Jesus is triumphantly visible in the Church, we are in danger of turning our minds away from the fact that the enduring power that sustains the Church is Christ alone, not our measures of success or

> coherence. But it is still true that … the glory of the future can be seen from time to time in lives that are fully turned to the face of Jesus ... We have not arrived at the end of all things, but we long for it because we have seen something of its radiance and joy in the life of the Christian community and its worship and service. In the past ten years, these things have become more and more clear to me in my involvement in the Communion's life. Our Communion has endured much suffering and confusion, and still lives with this in many ways; yet we are still privileged to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ in different ways within our common life, and so are reminded by God's grace that it is still Christ who lives secretly at the heart of our fellowship, and renews it day by day. (2012)

6. CRITICISMS

The most common criticisms of Williams' ecclesiology circle around an idea already touched on above: that, in the end, his focus on unity overcomes his focus on truth. When he says that his task 'is to try and maintain as long as possible the space in which people can have constructive disagreements' in the Church, it is clear that 'as long as possible' is a crucial qualifier – and that how long *is* possible is going to be a matter for fallible and debatable discernment, rather than for clarity and certainty. It is inevitable, then, that Williams was faced with repeated claims that he had held on *longer* than was possible – and that there can be no knock-down rejoinder to such claims, but only on-going, careful attention to the actual life of the Church.

The final two quotations given in the previous section suggest, however, a different kind of criticism that can be levelled at Williams' ecclesiology. On the one hand, he speaks of the privilege of having seen at times 'the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' shining in the life of the Church. On the other hand, he speaks of 'the prosaic things that can and must be

done now'. It is at least possible that Williams' focus on division and struggle, on painful learning across difference, on the agonistic element in the life of the church, leaves less than adequate space for the good and the ordinary, the joyful and the prosaic. If 'growing up together' is indeed the central theme of his ecclesiology, Williams' broadly apophatic and ascetic account could perhaps be supplemented by a greater focus on these other forms and contexts of growth – on routine nourishment and joyful celebration.

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